

# Hold Things Loosely

The Rev. Dr. Robert  
L. Griffin

Philippians 2:1-13

**Sermon Series:**  
**Pray Daily: Igniting**  
**Our Passion for God**

*...people want to hold on to their beliefs and their opinions so strongly that it becomes a source of stagnation for their lives instead of a source of inspiration.*

**T**welve and a half years ago, I stepped into this pulpit (well, actually not this one but the big MONSTER pulpit in the old sanctuary) to offer my first sermon here at VPC. My, oh my, how things have changed since then. Back then, we were just beginning to hear about plans for a capital campaign to build sanctuary and education space! Some of you can certainly remember those days, but many more of you hadn't even heard of VPC back in 1995. There were many other things we didn't know about back then.

HD television was barely a dream, most of us had just begun to hear about something called the Internet and most of us were paying by the minute to "dial up" the fledgling world-wide-web. Osama bin Laden had not yet issued his fatwa against the United States. We were then dealing with Desert Storm, not Iraq and Afghanistan. The Washington Nationals had not yet had a losing season. Norv Turner was coaching the Redskins and the Skins were – well, they were the Skins. But they did beat Dallas TWICE that year!! And incidentally, gas was about \$1.10 a gallon.

The truth is that life is full of change and transition. Things we can't dream of today will be tomorrow's commonplace reality. And things we hold dear today will

often lose their significance. We form our opinions and our beliefs based on what we know and understand at the time—or at least what we THINK we know and understand. But life stretches us and matures us in ways that we might never anticipate. Quantum physics, which is beyond our comprehension today, will one day make as much sense as gravity, and things we're rock sure of today may be up for grabs down the road. After all, how many of us grew up thinking Pluto was a planet? Poor Pluto.

I've titled my message Hold Things Loosely because that phrase has taught me a lot over these last dozen plus years. I've learned not to hold opinions and beliefs so strongly that one is unopen to being moved and persuaded to see things differently. A colleague of mine, who used to pastor one of the biggest churches in the country, once said to me, "People don't really care about what you know. They want to know what you have learned." And holding things loosely is one of the most important learnings I have ever had. Now, many of you know that I love the game of golf, and, on occasion, can actually demonstrate that my skill is roughly commensurate with my love. And one of the keys to an effective golf swing is that you MUST hold the club loosely in your hands. So often, I see bad players just squeezing the life out

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of the grip as if they're trying to wring the last drop of water out of a chamois. It's only when you hold the club loosely that your hands and arms have the freedom to release through the ball at impact. Certainly for many other sports, the same holds true. Not once in all my years of playing golf have I ever lost the grip on the club. Now I have, on occasion, lost the grip on my temper and THROWN a club, but I have never lost the club on a swing. You see, you don't have to squeeze things tightly in order to hang on to them. In fact, when you squeeze things to hang on to them, you actually take the life right out of them.

One of the sad things that I have seen far too often is that people want to hold on to their beliefs and their opinions so strongly that it becomes a source of stagnation for their lives instead of a source of inspiration. How many times have we witnessed this in congress or the town council, the homeowners association, the PTA or even in our own families? We can so easily become focused on proving that we are RIGHT that we completely overlook the fact that we could be wrong—or at least not as right as we think we are. I have to think that Paul could see this with the Philippians. He shares this beautiful poetic reminder with the Philippians—that they are to look foremost to the interest of others and not their own. That they are to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but to regard others as better than themselves. And then he goes on to share the great

example of Jesus Christ, who humbled himself to death on a cross in order to fulfill God's mission here in this world.

Booker T. Washington, shortly after he became president of the Tuskegee Institute, was walking in an exclusive section of town when a wealthy white woman asked him if he would like to earn some extra money by chopping wood for her. Dr. Washington rolled up his sleeves, chopped the wood and then took it into the house and stacked it by the fireplace. The next day, the lady found out who he was and went to his office to apologize profusely. Booker responded to her, "It's always a delight to do something for a friend." Putting the interest of others before our own concerns is truly modeling the servanthood of Jesus.

And I know that one of the most difficult things for us to do in life is to put the interest and concerns of others ahead of our own. That's true no matter what, but it is ESPECIALLY true when dealing with those whom you dislike or disagree with. Let's face it, putting our friends first is tough—putting our enemies first—now THAT takes some divine intervention. But it can be quite amazing, when we loosen our grip on trying to prove that we're right, how we open up all sorts of conversations and relationships with people who might see the world very differently than we do. We may remember that Jesus instructed us to "love your enemies." Well, it seems to me that one of the great definitions of love is to put the other person's interests

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ahead of your own. And the truly amazing thing is that when we DO that, we often communicate far more about what we believe and the values we hold than we could ever do through hours of rhetoric or debate.

Many years ago, Ralph Kiner played for the Pittsburgh Pirates. A team historically about as disappointing as the Redskins. Kiner had a particularly good year at the plate and, at the end of the season, went to the Pirates General Manager Branch Rickey and asked for a raise. Rickey refused. Kiner reminded Rickey that he had led the league in home runs that year and that he deserved appropriate compensation. Rickey asked him, "And where did we finish?" When Kiner responded that they had finished in last place, then Rickey said, "Well, Ralph, we can finish in last place just as well without you."

I know it's tough not to look out for ourselves. After all, it seems as if nobody else is doing it. But looking out for ourselves is rarely the right approach. This is especially true for those of you who are in marriages or significant relationships. Trust me on this—the more you focus on the other person's needs, the more likely they are to do the same. It's counter-intuitive but it's true. And I would like to suggest to you today that our relationships here, in the Body of Christ, are just as important as those in our families or our marriages.

As we were planning this service many weeks ago, Pete basically

told me to preach whatever is on my heart and whatever I think the church needs to hear. Well, here it is. This is my favorite passage of Scripture, because it establishes the foundation for how we ought to relate to each other. Friends, nothing gives me more grief than watching people be put down, torn down and thrown down by people who profess to be disciples of Jesus. And all the pray daily and the worship continually and the blah blah blah won't mean a thing if we can't look to the interests of OTHERS before we try to take care of ourselves.

Paul said to the Philippians, "Make my joy complete." He knew that the Philippians were a great community of faith, but he wanted to see them relate to each other in a way that truly demonstrated Jesus' example of humble servanthood. Friends, that is my prayer for you today. This is a great church—a great community of faith. How awesome it would be if I could hear reports that day-after-day and season-after-season more and more of you are caring FIRST for others and THEN for yourselves. Because THAT, more than any thing else, will demonstrate to the world that you really are disciples of Jesus.

Let us pray...

Lord Jesus, you took on human flesh and became one of us so that we might know what it means to be truly human in the fullest sense of the word. Give us your heart so that we look not to our own interests but to the interest of others. Teach us to hold things loosely

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so that we care less about being right and more about being in right relationships with each other (And guide us by your Spirit as we now gather for this congregational meeting that what we say and do may honor and glorify you.) so that you might be glorified with our lives. Amen.